

## Crowning Glory

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## Crowning Glory

**\*\*Disclaimer:\*\*** I do not own any of the characters; they belong to Cressida Cowell, Dreamworks, and Disney-Pixar.

Just for the record, I had this idea before I knew anything about the latest episode of "Defenders of Berk."

\* \* \*

><p>The sheep shears were unwieldy in his small hands, blades long as his forearm and newly sharpenedâ€"he should know, he'd done it himself that morning. He thought it would be best if he didn't reveal their true purpose, in case she thought he was making a joke; they were just the closest thing at hand when she'd asked for scissors. Now, holding them somewhat precariously as she faced away from him, it seemed like it would be all too easy for him to slip and cut off her head. He didn't want to think of how disappointed his dad would be then. And the poor king and queen would be heartbroken. Maybe he could talk her out of the plan that she'd somehow roped him into. "I don't think this is such a good idea," he ventured.<p>

Her answer was brisk and confident, accompanied by a dismissive wave of her hand. "Don't worry, it'll be fine. Better than now, at least." She shook her head in apparent disgust. "It's always in the way and I'm sick of it."

"But are you sure you want to \_cut\_ it? I'm sure Astrid would help you braid it or something if you asked. It'd be out of your way then."

She scoffed. "Astrid hates me. She wouldn't help me even if I begged

her."

"I don't think she hates youâ€|" Astrid did scowl at Merida a lot, but Astrid scowled at him a lot, too. She wasn'tâ€|easily impressed. Hiccup had wondered sometimes what he'd have to do to get Astrid to look at him like he wasn't something stuck to the bottom of her boot.

"Then she hates that I'm better with a bow than she'll ever be."

That was definitely true. He tried a different tack. "What about your mom? Don't you think you should ask her?"

She shrugged, curls bouncing down her back. "I don't need to. I already know what she'll say." She threw her shoulders back and sat up, lengthening her neck and folding her hands primly in her lap, becoming the young lady the queen expected her to be. Then she imitated her mother, intoning, "Her hair is a woman's crowning glory."

They didn't use those exact words, but the sentiment was one he'd observed around Berk, especially after washing day. There had to be a reason why all the women of Berk had such long hairâ€"and none of them let it get in the way of their work. He cocked his head. "Isn't it?"

"Everyone's got hair, Hiccup! Well, nearly everyone," she corrected herself. "It's nothing special. And it's stupid that my glory should come from what's on my head when yours comes from what you do." There was no way he could argue with that. Phlegma would fight just as fiercely and would be just as valuable to Berk if she had short hair.

"Besides," Merida went on, "I'm not a woman."

That was not what he'd expected her to say. Hiccup let the shears hang from one hand and scratched his elbow nervously. "Um, Meri, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm pretty sure you are."

Though he couldn't see her face, he was certain she rolled her eyes. "I meant I'm \_nine,\_," she huffed, but he thought he heard amusement around the edges of the words. She twisted around on the stool and tilted her head up, turning wide eyes on him the same way she did to her father. "Come on, Hiccup, please?"

He wished she wouldn't look at him like that. He knew she was mischievousâ€"or would be, if she got the chance; her mom kept too close an eye on her for her to get away with much. Too many times he'd seen a look on her face that reminded him of a more intelligent version of the ones the Thorston twins shared just before something disastrous happened. At the moment she was doing her best to make him forget all that, though, her expression angelic, with just a hint of a pout as she said his name. All of a sudden his tongue felt thick and his mouth dry, and he swallowed hard.

He wasn't ready to give up, though. As a last-ditch effort he said, "It'd probably be better if somebody else did it. Somebody who could, y'know, cut in a straight line. You don't want it to be crooked, do you?" He added a smile, just in case it helped.

An answering smile bloomed on her face and her eyes set to sparkling in a troublesome way. She shook her head slightly. "I want you to do it."

Hiccup let his shoulders slump at that, the weight of the shears seeming to pull him down. He should've known she'd be stubborn. "Merida!" It came out as a whine, and he couldn't blame her when her eyes narrowed.

"Are you scared?" she demanded.

"What? No!"

"Because it sounds like you are."

"I'm not scared," he said hotly.

"Then do it," she dared.

"Fine." He hefted the shears, ignoring her triumphant expression and pushing aside the lingering doubt. He was a Viking, and even if at the moment he was a hair-cutting Viking, he was going to go all out. "Turn around. And sit still."

The shears snapped shut with an echoing click, and ginger curls piled up at his feet. Soon enough the hair that had been nearly to Merida's waist stopped just at her shoulders. When he proclaimed that he was done, she leapt from the stool and shook her head again before running her fingers through what was left. "It feels so light!" she cried delightedly. It was strange to see her hair so much shorter than he was used to it being, but the way she beamed was pure Merida. She dodged the shears still in his hand to throw her arms around him briefly. "Thank you, Hiccup, I love it."

The tips of his ears burned as her hair tickled his cheek. To cover his embarrassment he put aside the shears and reached for a broom. "Let's get this cleaned up before Gobber gets back." She took the whisk he offered, and together they swept up every strand of hair from the packed-dirt floor of the forge.

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><p>Just before dinner they returned from playing in the woods, going first to the guest house so she could wash up a bit. They were cutting it close, in the hope that her parents would already be at the hall; she assured Hiccup that her mum wouldn't shout at her in public.<p>

So it was confidently that she pushed open the door and ran into her parents.

The queen glanced down and said, rather crossly, "You're late, Merida. Hurry and wash!" She broke off as Merida's new appearance registered; then she reached out and grabbed the girl by one shoulder, whirling her around. "What have you done?" she demanded, somewhere between a hiss and a shriek.

"My hair was bothering me, so I got it trimmed." Merida sounded defensive, and sure enough, the gleam in her eye mirrored some of her

mother's anger.

"You got it trimmed?" she repeated, eyeing the haircut as if to confirm that it was much tidier than if Merida had done it herself. She rounded on Hiccup. "And you let her? You helped?"

Hiccup was frozen by the normally placid queen's wrathful transformation. "Iâ€"I'm sorry, Iâ€"

"It's only hair, dear. It'll grow back," Fergus said, attempting to placate his wife. When her glare snapped to him he backed down, literally. Merida used the moment to take a step forward and one to the left, deftly shielding Hiccup from her mother's ire.

"It was my decision, Mum," she said, hands on her hips, when their attention returned to her. "I made Hiccup do it."

He felt, very vaguely, like he should stand up for himself, but Merida's mom was already going on. "I cannot believe you would do something so irresponsible. Both of you! But mostly you, Merida. How could you cut off all of your lovely hair? Look at you! You look like some filthy pox-ridden peasant child. It's to bed with you, no supper and absolutely no going out in public while you look so frightful."

"Elinorâ€|" the king said, and she turned to speak to him. From the corner of his eye Hiccup saw Merida's face scrunch up. Tears welled in her eyes, sadness joining her earlier fury, and he felt a sympathetic throbbing in his gut as he remembered all of the times his own dad had looked at him that way, disappointed and frustration and despair so evident on his face and now the queen's. Merida tried to cover the tremble in her lower lip with a glare, but it only lasted a moment before she pushed past her parents and bolted up the stairs.

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><p>He wolfed down his dinner and then waited until their parents were busy talking to slip away. No one paid him any attention as he made his way out of the mead hall and back to the guest house, a chunk of bread hidden away inside his tunic. He wished he could have taken more, but nothing else was practical.<p>

A serving woman sat close to the hearth, mending what he recognized as one of Merida's dresses; she didn't notice as he made his way up the stairs, and he wondered if Merida would even still be in the room, with so gullible a guard watching. There was only one door closed upstairsâ€"that had to be where she'd been sent.

If he lay down and turned his head, the gap between the bottom of the door and the thick wooden floorboards was big enough for him to see a slice of the room. "Meri," he hissed. She didn't answer. "Merida, are you awake?"

"What do you want?" Her voice was rough and angry, the tears finished but the sound of them still heavy in her throat.

"I brought you some bread." He broke the slice into bits small enough to fit, and poked them under the door. "I wanted to say sorry."

"It's not your fault." As true as that was, he still didn't like the lifelessness of her tone, or the memory of the way her face had crumpled. It was all wrong, and he wanted to fix it.

"Andâ€¦" He paused, squirming as a warm feeling, like writhing dragon hatchlings, filled his belly. Even though the floor was uncomfortable, he was glad she couldn't see his face. In a rush he said, "I still think your hair is pretty."

There was a long moment of silence, and then footsteps approached the door. Her voice, closer and lighter, asked, "You do? Really?"

"Yeah. It's like a bonfire." He felt stupid as soon as he said it, but it was true: the way it curled and caught the light reminded him of the flare of flames on peaceful summer nights. It was lively and bright and wild in a familiar, comfortable way. "And it's you."

She was quiet again, so much so that he hoped he hadn't upset her by talking about it more. But eventually she asked, "Do you have a knife?"

"A kniâ€¦"what do you need a knife for?"

"Shh! I know you do. Give it here."

It wasn't like she could do that much damage with just a dagger, he reasoned, pulling it from his belt and shoving it through the gap. She couldn't unlock the door with the knife; the worst she could probably do was carve caricatures of their parents in the walls.

"One more won't hurt," he heard her mutter. As he tried to make sense of that, she moved away, crossing the room lightly; he heard her rummaging around and something like a rip before her footsteps returned. Then a folded scrap of fabric emerged from under the door, followed by the knife.

He tucked the knife away and picked up the square of linen. The question on his lips was interrupted by the maid calling Merida's name up the stairs, asking what she was doing. "Practicin' my dancing," she yelled back, and Hiccup smiled to hear her sounding herself again. "You'd better go," she hissed to him.

He nodded, fingers rubbing absently at the smooth cloth in his hand, then said, "Alright. Good night, Merida."

"Good night, Hiccup," she said quietly. "And thank you."

His dad wasn't home yet, so he hurried up the stairs into his room. He perched on the edge of the bed, near the steady light of a lamp, and carefully unfolded the packet. A short length of cord was tied around a lock of bonfire-colored hair, gleaming against the pale linen like a curl of scrap copper, warm in his hand, and he smiled.

End  
file.